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ABSTRACT

In this study, from a list of ethical "do's" and "don't's" for teachers, four categories of ethical issues emerged: competence, professional relationships, confidentiality, and conflicts of interest. Competence embodies both negative and positive aspects, as teachers not only must refrain from doing the wrong thing but also must work to enhance the level of effectiveness in their own teaching and in the profession. In the professional relationships category, courtesy is basic. It is grounded in an attitude of respect and patience with co-workers, school administrators, students, and parents. But, while the reverse of courtesy is being overly critical of others in the school setting, teachers must still be able to offer constructive criticism to school administrators and other teachers. Dilemmas of confidentiality should be solved by considering the surrounding facts, common sense approaches, and the actions that would be in the best interest of all parties involved. Finally, while avoiding even the appearance of an activity that might lead to a misunderstanding of what is proper may not always be possible, it is a goal that will relieve conflicts of interest in most professional situations. (Contains 12 references.) (ND)

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ED 411 234

THE ETHICAL BEHAVIOR OF TEACHERS IN AN EVER-CHANGING AMERICAN SOCIAL SYSTEM

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The nature of the American society is such that it seems to be constantly evolving into a more liberal approach to the way social values are viewed. Teachers in America's schools must somehow read the American mind and try to perpetuate the values society perceives as valuable at any one particular time. Even though society is taking a more liberal position on many issues, it still practices a basically conservative approach to the principles of ethical behaviors for professional educators. It is for that reason that today's teachers should be just as concerned about the basic tenets of their profession as teachers did 15 or so years ago.

Teachers at all levels of education should take a great deal of pride in their profession. It is one worthy of special attention because it touches the lives of such a vast portion of the population over an extended period of time. Education is the true gateway to success in life, yet it is so very often taken for granted. The special people who make a decision to join the profession do so as a way for them to share what they have learned to others, out of a concern to help other people become better persons, and as a professional occupation for themselves. As this choice is being made it is imperative that they recognize the important responsibility that they are undertaking. To assume that a teacher does not have a responsibility to be a role model to others is an attempt by a future teacher to enter the profession with their eyes totally closed.

It is true that everyone should have a right to a life of their own, but this does not mean you are free to do as you please. Your rights stop where there is a conflict with the rights of others. Students have a right to be instructed by people who serve as good role models. Actions are a powerful teacher. To assume that students are not aware of the character of their teachers is totally inaccurate. Every person looks for another person or persons to serve as a model for the design of their own lives. In many cases this person is their teacher...simply because they are in such close contact with them each day. Therefore, it is incumbent upon teachers to develop and practice a code of ethics which is worthy of the profession to which they have chosen to commit their lives.

It might be helpful to consider some things that teachers should avoid doing as well as others they should make a habit of doing.

Some Don't's

1. Do not criticize other teachers in front of students.
2. Do not correct other teachers in front of students.
3. Do not relate personal problems that students have to other students.
4. Do not criticize other teachers or administrators when talking to parents.
5. Do not mix personal money with school money.
6. Do not conscientiously try to get students or other faculty to develop a negative attitude toward another

teacher.

7. Do not publicly endorse goods or services provided by a school and receive a stipend for it.
8. Do not take teaching materials developed by a group of teachers and publish them as your own.
9. If you must work at a second job, do not accept employment in a field that would be considered inappropriate by your school community.

Some Do's

1. Be enthusiastic
2. Have a positive attitude toward the schools and the educational system.
3. Dress appropriately for the school setting .
4. Be eager to learn new things that will improve your professional expertise.
5. Indicate a closeness of professional outlook with other teachers on the staff.
6. Demonstrate a love for your students.
7. Be patient with students and other faculty members.
8. Cooperate with other teachers in the sharing of ideas and materials.
9. Treat all people with respect and be fair in all your dealings with them.
10. Be committed to help others learn the skills of teaching in order to perpetuate the profession.

11. Fulfill contracts with employing school divisions, unless released from the contract by mutual agreement.
12. Obey the law. A teacher has a right and in many instances an obligation to express his/her opinion about the wisdom or justice of a given law. An opinion questioning a law, however, does not justify failure to fulfill the requirement of that law.
13. Practice high moral standards based on the expectations of the community you serve.
14. Support and participate in professional organizations.

These lists are merely representative of a number of other suggestions which could be made. If teaching is to be looked upon as a true profession, its members must act according to society's expectations of its teachers. It is very difficult to describe correct ethical behavior because of the wide range of values that people possess, however, there must be some standards or the profession will evolve into a mire of disrespect.

Categories of Ethical Issues

From the lists of do's and don'ts emerge four categories of ethical issues for teachers. These categories are competence, professional relationships, confidentiality, and conflicts of interest. Each of these headings consists of a number of thorny sub-issues.

Competence. Attaining and maintaining a high level of competence in teaching is the foremost requirement for both the beginning and veteran teacher. This responsibility requires the continuous pursuit of knowledge in one's field and related areas of knowledge as well as in the methods of instruction.

The basis for competence is a commitment to the zealous pursuit of teaching, not merely a half-hearted effort. This active approach will provide a grounding for such actions as increasing one's knowledge and keeping up with the changes that occur in any professional activity.

The means for professional enrichment are available to the teacher. From the simple act of reading about the latest developments and research one may advance to taking courses and working with other professionals in educational projects.

Competence also includes a superior performance of one's contractual duties and doing the required tasks on time. This includes following reasonably the rules of the educational institution. From another point of view one must not break the rules or take a part in helping others to break them.

Working to improve the educational system is a part of the ethics of competence. Making efforts to constructively change harmful rules may improve the educational experience. Assisting others in improving performance is a form of outreach to upgrade the level of competence.

An ethical dilemma arises when one sees that another professional is violating the standards of the profession by

improper actions. If the obvious helpful actions of discussing the matter with the offending co-worker and assisting him/her to change their ways does not succeed, a difficult choice remains: whether to report the offender to the supervisor. The choice is often not easy, even when the mandate to maintain and improve the level of competence is considered.

Supporting and participating in professional associations is a means of enhancing one's own performance and the competence of the profession. Some conflict may occur when one becomes too involved in activities that take so much time and energy that they detract from doing one's primary job--teaching effectively. Saying no at the right time may enhance competence.

In applying the ethical mandate of competence one immediately confronts real situations in education. For instance, consider the older social studies teacher who does little reading in his or her field beyond the newspapers. If one would apply various levels of action--minimum, moderate, and maximum--to this situation, the older teacher's performance would not reach even the minimum level. Certainly one could conclude that students are not being provided an adequate learning experience.

Such breaches in the ethical requirements of competence may occur at any age of teaching, from the neophyte instructor distracted by social relationships, through the mid-career teacher loaded with extra responsibilities, to the older person described earlier.

The requirement of competence is difficult to apply because it embodies both negative and positive conditions. Not only must one refrain from doing the wrong thing but there is a need to enhance the level of effectiveness in one's own teaching and in the profession.

Professional Relationships. Courtesy is the basic ingredient in the dealings of the professional with the various constituencies in the school, including other teachers and school personnel, students, and parents. Courtesy is grounded in a positive attitude toward colleagues and clients. The effects of courtesy are found in an attitude of respect and patience with co-workers, school administrators, young people, and their parents.

The reverse of courtesy is being overly critical of others in the school setting. Criticism of other teachers and school personnel disrupt supportive relationships. Of particular concern is the act of criticizing other teachers in front of students or while talking to parents. Most teachers would likely list this criticism at the top of any list of "non-professional" actions. The encouraging of others to criticize school professionals is similarly harmful to healthy contact within the school.

The next step in professional relationships is cooperation with other school personnel. Freely sharing ideas, materials, and time with other teachers is the best example of cooperation.

The product of this sharing will multiply the effectiveness of both the beginning and the seasoned instructor.

The master teacher must take responsibility in the guidance and training of younger teachers and in supervising teaching aides and student teachers. This commitment will establish the setting for sound instruction and mature professional relationships in the future.

Potentially disruptive situations can result from unprofessional relationships. The cooperation among teachers should not lead to the formation of cliques that would exclude others and promote friction. Romantic relationships need to be kept in check and the display of affection is best kept private and away from school grounds.

While cooperation is a key component in dealing with others, the teachers should be able to offer constructive criticism of school policies and personal actions to school administrators and other teachers. The basic courtesy of the professional relationship will be most severely tested in these situations of criticism.

A further situation to test the relationships is the need to support the professional who is demonstrating emotional instability or is manifesting drug or alcohol abuse. The ultimate action of reporting the behavior may result from considerations of student safety, effective conduct of instruction, and the well-being of the unstable associate.

Confidentiality. The professional treatment of information about others that is obtained in the course of teaching is a major ethical concern. The ethical issues here relate to but go beyond the legal requirements of such matters as grade confidentiality that are found in federal and state statutes and in school regulations.

The teacher learns many private matters regarding students, teachers and parents in the course of the school day. These matters may concern relationships, home life, money problems, and a host of sensitive issues. The best approach is for the teacher to retain the information without passing it on to others.

Unfortunately, keeping confidential information to oneself may not always be the appropriate course. For instance, it may be helpful to the student if other teachers or school personnel know information so that they may relate in a more meaningful way to the student. The confidential information may have an effect on the learning experiences being provided for the student or it could possibly directly affect the health or safety of other students.

Each dilemma of confidentiality should be solved by considering the surrounding facts, common sense approaches, and the actions that would be in the best interest of all the parties involved in the dilemma. Assistance may be sought from non-teaching professionals, such as medical, mental health, safety, or financial specialists.

Conflicts of interest. A teacher who is a single parent and works nights in a bar; a coach who mixes the proceeds of an athletic event with his or her own money with the intent of separating it at a later date; or a department head that endorses an educational product or service and receives some type of compensation in return are placing themselves in a rather tedious ethical position . Any of these may be appropriate or inappropriate, depending upon the circumstances. However, each of these situations has the potential of placing the teacher in a position that could easily be perceived by a school community as being unacceptable.

The most effective solution to conflicts of interest problems may be the avoidance of even the appearance of an activity that might lead to a misunderstanding of what is proper or not proper. While this may not always be possible because of economic or personal considerations, it is a goal that will relieve the problem of conflicts of interest in most professional situations.

Every good teacher should develop a standard of professional ethics that he/she sees as the ideal model. It is true that this model will be tested from time to time but if a person is consistent in their behavior it will prove to be a supporting factor when they are in doubt. There are extenuating circumstances to almost every problem. A person must know when to step back and look at a problem for a second or third time before making a final reaction to it. Times do change and we

need to keep up with what is happening and change when it is right and appropriate to do so.

As educators think of the values they practice on a personal basis they should expect the students they teach to develop many of these same values. This is as it should be. However, it does place an enormous responsibility on them to always try to do the right thing.

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